

Looking Ahead at Social Learning: 10 Predictions

http://www.astd.org/LC/2010/0710_meister.htm

The last decade has brought a multitude of changes in technology and in the learning function. What will the next 10 years have to offer?

Ten years ago, we had just come out of one of the most costly IT investments of all time—the Y2K scare. Mark Zuckerberg, co-founder of Facebook, was in high school. Microsoft had just lost a major antitrust lawsuit; Google was getting settled in its first office space after being in a garage for its first year; and the presidential election results were stalled due to hanging chads. The economy was in a state of hope and opportunity known as the dot-com boom, and the phrase "Web 2.0" was 1 year old.

In the learning industry, the LMS was seen as the provider of the comprehensive solution for the technology needed in an organization; e-learning content providers were merging to provide comprehensive libraries; and portals were the intranet solution of choice for content destinations.

What a difference a decade makes. Will the next decade bring just as much change or more? Not only are there new technologies being introduced daily, but shifts such as globalization and demographic changes will surely affect our future. In 1999, the United States accounted for 43 percent of the largest global companies in the Financial Times Global 500. By 2009, only 36 percent of global companies were from the United States, while the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) moved from a combined four top 500 companies in 1999, to 52 in 2009.

Teams composed of employees from multiple countries across several time zones are no longer unusual, which makes face-to-face training logistically difficult and expensive. Regarding demographics, in only four years, Millennials (born between 1977 and 1997) will make up 47 percent of the workforce. Their comfort with tools such as Twitter, Facebook, and texting surely indicates that they will expect tools like those to be used in their work and learning experience.

Throughout the last three years, we have researched what the future holds for fields as diverse as human longevity and the future of the web. That research helped us come up with 10 predictions for the future of social learning. If you are just now dipping your toes into the social learning pool, we hope the following predictions will give you some ideas about where the future is headed so that you can prepare accordingly.

Prediction 1 | Augmented reality learning emerges

Imagine a future where you are able to pour on contact lenses that act as a type of computer display. Researchers at the University of Washington are working on contact lenses consisting of nano-objects that self-assemble when poured into the eye. Even further along is MIT's SixthSense, a wearable device that allows the use of natural hand gestures to interact with the environment, powered by a cell phone. A camera and projector are suspended from a lanyard, and wearers indicate what they want by using hand gestures.

For example, by drawing a circle on your wrist, SixthSense knows you want the time, so it projects a watch on to your wrist. Never again will you be put in the uncomfortable position of not remembering someone's name because you will be able to walk up to someone, and project onto your palm the LinkedIn profile of the person and their Facebook information, and get a quick Google search of them, as long as there is a photo of them anywhere on the web.

So what could be the implications for social learning? Simulations and games could take on a whole new level of interactivity, technical training could be done virtually without expensive labs, and management conferences could become networking events designed around finding knowledge content built on a pre-event profile, just to name a few. Even in prototype, SixthSense is less than \$350, so in the near future, the device could be a highly affordable supplement in the learning environment.

Prediction 2 | Most learning incorporates use of a mobile device

The world is going mobile. Morgan Stanley estimated that smartphones will outship the global notebook and netbook market in 2010 and will outship the global PC market (notebook, netbook, and desktop) by 2012. By 2015, more users will connect to the Internet via mobile device than by desktop PC.

Our mobile devices—smartphones, tablets (such as iPad), or netbooks—are already transforming the face of publishing. Consider that in 2009, five of the top 10 novels that were published in Japan started out as text novels before emerging into print. Traditional newspapers are seeing their circulation erode as more customers begin viewing their news online. Already, there are more mobile devices in the world than there are people.

With increased capabilities of real time search on all mobile devices, learning will truly be just in time. Ask a question, get an answer. Our world will turn into three-minute learning vignettes. When you incorporate GPS sensitivity into a learning environment, many possibilities emerge.

Similar to the GPS-sensitive program FourSquare, we could design check-in points for new hires to get to know their company and its history. Or with programs such as Serendipity (under development at MIT), set our social networking profile to alert us whenever we're near an expert in the topic of our choice. Perhaps the future role of learning is to find, organize, and enable the experts?

Prediction 3 | Games and simulations are used for every content area

The Millennial generation, which will comprise the majority of the workforce in just a few years, grew up on GameBoys, World of Warcraft, and EVE Online. IBM has already studied whether participation in massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) develops leadership skills. They found that having to recruit a guild, fulfill a series of tasks, motivate, and retain a guild led to the development of leadership skills. MMORPGs can be nonviolent, virtual-world-building games as well, with experiments in teaching math and science already under way.

FarmVille is a real-time farm simulation game developed by Zynga, available as an application on Facebook. In April 2010, 1 percent of the world was playing this virtual game. Zynga promises new elements of collaboration and social partnership with the game, which is largely individual in nature. If 82.4 million people are learning how to create a farm, imagine what can happen if learning departments could apply this process to teaching employees in a company.

Companies such as BTS have been using simulations with management teams for years, allowing senior executives to practice running the company. As markets become increasingly complex and specialized, it is difficult for an executive to get a chance to see the whole picture. A management simulation provides the ability for what Michael Schrage has called "serious play"—an opportunity to innovate, take risks, and practice in a safe environment.

But games and simulations aren't just for management. New-hire games can be used even in advance of hiring to allow players to become familiar with a company's products and services. Collaboration is increasingly important at most companies, and games could take a key role in teaching collaboration skills.

Prediction 4 | We will have a huge appetite

In the words of Apple's marketing department, "there's an app for that." In the case of applications for iPhone and iPod touch, more than 130,000 have been developed to date. Morgan Stanley predicts 500,000 new applications before the end of 2010. Since people are already accustomed to the convenience and functionality of apps, a whole new breed of apps for corporate environments will emerge. Corporate HR and learning functions will get into the business of custom app development.

Possible apps include

- acronym lookup
- product description and specs apps
- benefits chooser
- campus and conference room map
- room scheduler
- retirement planner
- expert locator
- virtual profile (replacing the company phone directory)

- cafeteria menus and reviews
- virtual manager.

With just a little work, you could probably brainstorm another 10 apps in the next 10 minutes. Nearly anything that is in print now can be converted into a rich, constantly updated application.

Prediction 5 | Peer-to-peer learning blossoms

When people attend conferences or workshops, it's not unusual to read in the evaluations that one of the most beneficial aspects of the event was the ability to network and learn from peers. Through technology, that peer-to-peer learning has now taken on a whole new level of meaning. While baby boomer managers fret that time spent on Facebook is a time waster, Millennials can't imagine getting their work done without relying on the tribe they've collected through their online social networks.

To mediate an organization's concerns for security while balancing the need to allow people to connect, expect to see a proliferation of platforms aimed at Facebook-type applications in the organization. Furthermore, expect some of these platforms to be specifically developed in the learning field and incorporated or integrated with the LMS. Learning functions will be able to determine which content is most in demand by perusing the most popular and most viewed content, and then assembling content developed by contributors into formal learning courses.

At this point, knowledge management and training become such a seamless continuum that it becomes fruitless to try and separate them functionally. Anticipate that learning functions will become the new and improved knowledge management owners as well.

Prediction 6 | Expert and credibility ratings create trusted search networks

In a study at the University of California at Berkeley, it was estimated that knowledge is doubling every 18 months. Combine that with the time it takes to become an expert, which is usually estimated at 10,000 hours of practice, or roughly 10 years. No sooner do you become an expert than your knowledge is outdated.

Now consider how you spend your days and how you learn about something quickly. For example, maybe you'd never heard the term "MMPORG" before. If you're like most people, you would be unlikely to look up a training course on MMPORG as your first stop. Instead, you go to your favorite online search engine and type in the term. The problem is that there is so much information available, you might not know which definition to trust.

As search evolves, we will be able to identify industry experts and friends whom we trust, and our search results will include in the algorithm of results those sites and resources that our trusted sources have indicated as solid content. For example, you might add Tony Bingham, the president and CEO of ASTD, as a trusted source. If Tony had endorsed a definition of MMPORG, then that definition would rise to the top of your search results. Your tribe of trusted sources will become the way for you to navigate through the proliferating mass of online information.

Prediction 7 | Search bots go on the prowl for you

It's one thing to know what term or question to type into a search engine, and it's another thing entirely to know the terms you should use or the questions you should be asking. As Will Rogers once said, "It's not what you know that hurts you, it's what you know that ain't so." In other words, with all the knowledge available, it's what is out there that you don't know about that can hurt you.

One solution to this dilemma will be search robots, commonly called "search bots," that will prowl the web on your behalf, looking for information that fits a profile of requested knowledge. On many online retailer sites, you see the early days of this with products suggested to you with phrases similar to, "You might also like..."

Now imagine that you've completed a search profile that says you are in sales training, in a major pharmaceutical company based in New Jersey. You'd like to know about the top developments in healthcare reform, any news alerts for the major suppliers you rely on, important news feeds on products and executives in your company, and a search through any publication in the world relevant to training for pharmaceutical sales reps.

Your bot will be at your service, culling the data on the web and delivering it to your doorstep every morning. Like any good pet, it will get better with feedback and training, so you will teach it to become more accurate by indicating that you like some bits of content and not others. Your own personal information robotic concierge, at your service soon!

Prediction 8| Governments will become more involved in ensuring that its citizens have access to training and retraining

With advances in human longevity, the economic setbacks many people experienced during the last few years, and a backlash against an unfettered corporate focus on profit, governments are starting to see that the strain put on their purses due to unemployment and underemployment is out of balance. In Korea for example, the government not only provides tax benefits for training investment, but also provides co-investment dollars.

Expect to see governments provide more incentives for retraining workers. These incentives could include anything from tax incentives to authorizing personal accounts, much like 401(k) retirement savings plans in the United States. Sometimes called "Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLAs)," California, Indiana, Iowa, Illinois, Washington, and other U.S. states have introduced legislation to provide tax credits and breaks for investment in training.

Imagine a day when the learning function is not only getting funds from the corporate budgets, but individuals can elect to attend classes using their LiLA account money. Will that change the way learning functions think about the offerings they have available, and will it drive even more cooperation with universities to provide focused, relevant curriculum?

Prediction 9| The learning function's focus shifts to accreditation, with less emphasis on the learning process itself

As the amount of knowledge required to perform the job moves more and more to instant access, it will become less and less likely that people will prove their credentials by having an internal corporate training completion on their personnel records. Instead, learning functions will set the standards of performance required to achieve accreditation, install systems for enabling achievement of that accreditation, and track completion.

For example, a service technician may have three levels of accreditation to achieve for any given product suite—apprentice, master, and expert. The learning function will work with subject matter experts to define what is expected of each level, provide incentives for achieving accreditation, and then create platforms and resources for people to self-direct their achievement. For the apprentice level, a technician may have several steps to be signed off on by his manager, including going out on a service call and observing a master, all the way to solo completion.

Additionally, the technician will have to pass a test, which may be done in collaboration with other technicians since what really matters is the performance. The learning function could have e-learning available, but a peer-to-peer learning platform could be populated with content that the learners themselves contribute, also called user-generated content. To move to expert, a requirement could include contribution to the peer-to-peer learning platform.

Prediction 10| You will be rated publicly, much like a Yelp or Amazon rating for people

Yelp is a popular social networking and review site where users rate and comment on local restaurants. The Millennial generation is accustomed to relying on user input on sites such as rateyourprofessor.com to steer everything from where to have fish tacos to which professors to avoid at college. Few people order from Amazon without looking at the cumulative rating stars of past purchasers. Sites such as glassdoor.com already provide insights regarding the culture, pay, and management quality. It is not a big leap to assume that eventually, managers will be publicly rated, followed by everyone being rated.

Will it change a manager's behavior if he knows that his tendency toward berating employees will show up in a public review the next day? Will the manager who chronically micromanages begin to adjust her behavior if multiple reviewers have commented on the same thing? It is one thing to go into the quiet of your office to review a private 360-degree report and quite another to have your children reading about your work behaviors.

This may be one of the scariest predictions so far, as you wonder about the fairness of disgruntled employees commenting publicly. On Yelp, the establishment owners are allowed to provide a rebuttal on comments, so this could be a feature of how a public people review system would work. But do anticipate that privacy has taken a whole new turn and will continue to do so as we progress.

Learning's future: champion or outcast?

One of the main reasons we like to think about the future is because we hope the learning and development field will be the first to step up to take ownership of many of the ideas we have presented here. We've been in learning functions where people have said they think social networking is a fad and micro-blogging is a waste of time. We beg to differ, and believe that the next generation of work coming into organizations will demand being able to work in ways they've already found to enable success. If the learning function does not step up to the task, some other department in the organization will, and a learning function will become irrelevant.

On the other hand, if the learning function has a vision for the future, and works patiently to inspire organizations to move into a new way of work and learning, the relevance and core criticality for business success could be unprecedented in our field's history. Which will we choose?